

Cowboy Jarod

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Summary: Jarod becomes a rodeo cowboy to investigate a roping accident that left a cowboy crippled.

Cowboy Jarod

**\*\*Cowboy Jarod\*\*** By Allie Davidson Copyright 1999

**\*\*Bar M Ranch, Riverton, Wyoming\*\***

Miss Parker stepped out of the bunkhouse onto the wooden porch. Her lip curled when a cowboy tipped his hat to her as he rode by on a horse.

"Ma'am," he said, his eyes appreciating her mini-skirt clad body.

"If anyone calls me ma'am again, I'm going to shoot them," she told Sydney. She stared over the top of her sunglasses at the cowboy's retreating back and sighed impatiently. She and Sydney had gone through everything Jarod had left in the bunkhouse. Other than an envelope addressed to her and containing a copy of Zane Grey's "Riders of the Purple Sage", there were no clues to indicate what he was up to. She walked off the steps to the ranch yard and just avoided stepping in a pile of horse dung. She shoved her glasses to the bridge of her nose with a forefinger. "I can't believe Jarod would be here."

"I'm not surprised at all," Sydney said. "Almost every little boy fantasizes about being a cowboy. Literature and history abounds with the mystic of the gunslinger or the outlaw. Look at the romanticized figures immortalized in western history, lore and legend such as Wild Bill Hickock and Doc Holiday. Even Calamity Jane," Sydney smiled and glanced toward the gun he knew to be hidden in Ms. Parker's jacket.

"Don't even go there," she warned.

"Knowing Jarod, though, there's probably a good reason he was here," Sydney said, wisely dropping the subject.

"Other than wanting to play Wild West, I can't see what that reason would be," Miss Parker commented.

Their conversation ceased as the ranch foreman, the man they'd been waiting for, joined them. He looked like he'd just stepped out a Clint Eastwood western movie.

"Ma'am," he drawled and tipped his hat to Miss Parker.

"What exactly was Jarod doing here," Miss Parker asked between clenched teeth, as Sydney stared at the ground to hide a grin.

"Working." The foreman appeared surprised by the question. "He can ride and rope like he was born in the saddle with a lasso in his hands. I was sorry to see him go. The hours are long and the pay ain't great, but he worked hard." The cattle foreman shifted the hat on his head. "And he took one of my best roping horses, too."

"Took?" Sydney asked.

"Won, actually," the foreman admitted. Miss Parker felt his gaze sweep over her legs, he cleared his throat and looked away. "He beat me and the others fair and square in a poker game. Said he didn't play much. Couldn't fool me."

"Great, Wonderboy's becoming a card shark, too," Miss Parker said. "I don't suppose it'd do any good to ask where he went?"

The cowboy shrugged. "Well, ma'am, I didn't ask and he didn't say. He just gave notice, collected his last paycheck, loaded up that palomino horse and high-tailed it out of here with Billy and Dwayne."

"And just who is Billy and Dwayne?" Miss Parker asked, and realized she tapped one toe.

"Yeah, Dwayne and Billy were championship team ropers, that is until Billy had an accident. He ain't gonna be roping and riding anymore. He's confined to a wheelchair."

"Do you know where they went?"

The foreman lifted his hat off his head and scratched. "Well," he drawled, "last time I heard Jarod and Dwayne were riding the circuit." Miss Parker shook her head and he continued. "Rodeo circuit. PRCA, Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association," he explained. "Heard Jarod won all around in Cheyenne. That ain't no simple accomplishment, especially for a greenhorn."

Miss Parker rolled her eyes heavenwards. Good God, she could understand most of the things Jarod pretended to be, but a rodeo cowboy? That was going a bit too far. Sydney looked intrigued. She wanted to kick him in the ass.

"Jarod won all around cowboy?" Sydney asked.

"Yeah, roping and steer wrestling. From what I hear he did a pretty good job in bull riding." He rubbed the stubble on his chin, his gaze intent on Miss Parker for a moment. "You ain't Jarod's girl are you?"

"I'm not certain what you're talking about." Miss Parker raised a questioning eyebrow toward Sydney, who gave her a barely visible shrug.

"Yeah, well, uh ma'am if you ain't, then how'd you like a riding lesson?"

Miss Parker had a feeling he wasn't talking about an equestrian-type riding lesson. She measured him up with a long slow glance from his booted feet to his cowboy hat, then moved close to him so she could whisper in his ear.

"Hey partner, do you remember the saying that goes something like 'screw you and the horse you rode in on'?"

The cowboy winced, but grinned despite the rejection.

"I remember now that Jarod said something about a tall gal with brown hair and fantastic legs. I'm certain he meant you."

Sydney chuckled and Miss Parker ignored him.

"Really? And just what did... Cowboy Jarod have to say?" she managed between clenched teeth, not certain she really wanted to know.

"That you look as picturesque as a mountain glacier, only the glacier is warmer." The foreman tipped his hat and with that parting remark, he strode across the dusty courtyard toward a string of tied, saddled horses. Seething, Miss Parker watched him go. So Jarod likened her to a glacier, did he? Well, he would feel the bite of her cold temper when she caught him.

Sydney didn't bother to suppress a smile. Miss Parker cast him her best withering glare.

"What do you find amusing, Syd?"

"I think you just turned down a unique opportunity."

"For what?" Miss Parker wrinkled her nose. "I'm surprised boss cowboy likes something that doesn't look and smell like a horse." Her gaze traveled over the Wyoming landscape. "Well, there's only so many rodeos Jarod could go, and he has a truck and trailer that will slow him down. We need to get Broots checking out all PCRA sanctioned rodeos and contestant rosters...." She stared around her, frowning behind her sunglasses. "Where is Broots?"

"It appears that Broots has been assimilated into the culture." He nodded and gestured behind Miss Parker. She turned as Broots strode up in a cowboy ensemble: boots, faded jeans, shirt, vest and topped with a cowboy hat.

"What is on your head?" Miss Parker enunciated each word slowly as

though she spoke to an embecil.

Broots opened his mouth and closed it several times, cast his eyes downward while one hand touched the cowboy hat on his head. "I've been, uh, riding... horses. They uh, were teaching me how to rope."

"We're not out here in this God forsaken place so you can play Wyatt Earp. We have a lot of work to do before the evil twin finds out where we've gone."

"It'll take days for Mr. Lyle to figure out where we went. I made sure of it," Broots said. "By the time he gets to Timbuktu by jeep..."

Miss Parker could only stare at Broots as a slow grin spread across her face. "Lyle thinks we went to Timbuktu?"

Broots nodded. "It's a real town in Africa near the Niger River."

\* \* \* \*

\*\*Salinas Rodeo, Salinas, California\*\*

"That's the time to beat for team roping, folks," boomed the announcer over the arena PA system.

Jarod gave the rope a shake, loosening it from around the steer's back legs. His partner, Dwayne loosened his lasso from the steer's horns and gave Jarod a thumb up.

"That was three time champ Dwayne Hicks along with his new heeling partner Jarod Rogers riding the palomino, Trigger," the announcer continued. "That greenhorn Rogers sure can rope n' ride, folks. He was all around cowboy in Casper and Cheyenne and is currently third in Wyoming PCRA standings. Let's give both boys a big hand."

In the midst of cheers and whistles, Jarod and Dwayne galloped their horses from the arena. Outside the gate, in a fenced holding area crowded with rodeo officials, horses and cowboys, a man wheeled toward them, his steed a chair with metal wheels.

"Hey, if you two repeat this tomorrow you've got the championship," Billy said, then looked over at the palomino. "You know Rogers, I always wanted to ask you a question, seeing that you have a palomino named Trigger and all, you ain't related to...?"

"No relation to Roy." Jarod grinned. "I get that question a lot."

The three turned as two sandy-haired men rode up and halted their horses. Buck and Charles Garrett were Jarod and Dwayne's main opposition in the team roping competition.

"Looks like we all made it to the final round tomorra'," Buck Garrett said and rested his forearm on the saddlehorn. "Hey greenhorn, ya don't miss do ya? Billy, you musta' been giving Rogers here a few tips."

"Nah, wasn't me. He's a natural."

Jarod watched the McGuire brothers closely. They had the most to gain from Billy's accident. After the accident, Buck's earnings topped an all time record. He not only won all around cowboy in that fateful rodeo that left Billy crippled, but also secured high-paid endorsements from several western clothing manufacturers. Charles, the younger brother, hunched in his saddle and said nothing while looking everywhere but at Billy.

"Buck!" a woman called from across the holding area. Jarod looked over and noticed a red-headed woman mounted on an appaloosa horse.

"Damn. Looks like I'm being summoned. Be seein' ya all," Buck said, tipped his hat and rode away, his silent brother following.

"How long you known Buck and Charlie?" Jarod asked as the brothers joined the woman. She appeared angry about something and shook her finger at Buck. From this distance Jarod couldn't hear what she said.

"Ah, hell," Billy said, "Dwayne and me have known them since we were babies. We all grew up together. In fact, Buck and me used to fight over Lucy," he nodded toward the redheaded woman. "As you can see, Buck won."

There was a tinge of bitterness to his voice. "Win some, lose some. He got Lucy and until last year," he gestured to the wheelchair, "my heeling times have always been better then his."

Their conversation ceased as a young woman walked up. Long blonde hair fell from under a black felt cowboy hat, and freckles were sprinkled across her nose. Behind her, a black and white paint horse followed. She smiled at both men, but her frank, admiring blue eyes lingered on Jarod.

"Hey guys, that was some impressive riding," she drawled.

"Interesting looking horse. That's a pinto, right?" Jarod grinned, pleased that he recognized the breed.

"She is a Paint, actually," the woman corrected. "Her name is Oreo."

"Oreo?" Jarod echoed, intrigued. "You named your horse after a cookie?"

Jessie's eyebrows rose in surprise. "You know, black and white. Oreo? You slid the two cookie halves apart and lick out the creamy center."

Jarod ignored Dwayne and Billy's snickering. "Yes, yes, I see the idea." Jarod nodded, understanding the correlation between the black and white horse and the black and white cookie.

She held out her hand. "I'm Jessie. Oreo and I are running barrels. I saw you in Cheyenne but never got a chance to introduce myself."

"I'm Jarod Rogers." He shook her hand.

"You know cowboy, my girlfriend over there," she nodded toward a curvaceous brunette on a buckskin horse, "bet me that a good looking cowboy like you has a girl tucked at home somewhere."

It took Jarod a moment to realize that the woman thought he had a girlfriend. A brief image of Miss Parker came to mind, but he banished it. "Uh, no."

"That's a good answer." She smiled a hundred-watt smile and Jarod felt lightheaded. "That means I'll see you tonight at the Diamondhead. But, I think I'm going to need my hand back."

Embarrassed, Jarod realized he still held her hand. He let it go.

Dwayne and Billy hooted with laughter.

"You just done got yourself asked out for a date," Dwayne said. The Diamondhead was the local country western dance hall.

"You boys going to be at the Diamondhead tonight?" she asked Billy and Dwayne.

"Yeah, we'll be there," Dwayne assured her, "and we'll make sure Greenhorn comes with, even if we have to hog-tie and drag him there."

"I hope that won't be necessary." She gave Jarod a slow glance. "See you there, cowboy," she winked then sauntered away, Oreo following behind.

"Woo-wee Greenhorn, she's got her eye on you, you dog," Dwayne teased and slapped his partner not too lightly on the shoulder. "Come on, let's get the horses bedded down."

"I'll see you two tonight," Billy said as he waved and wheeled away.

In the cool shade of the breezeway barn, Jarod lifted the western saddle and saddle blanket off the horse's back and set them over the stall door, then brushed his horse down before turning him into the straw-bedded stall and throwing him an armful of hay.

"I'm out of here, Rogers," Dwayne called from a few stalls down. "You don't plan on disappointing Jessie, do you?"

"I'll be there," Jarod called back. Dwayne waved and left the barn.

Alone, Jarod sat next to the stall on a wood bench, pulled a leather pack to his lap and extracted a red spiral-bound notebook. He flipped to a page where he'd pasted a newspaper cutout. A photo with a newspaper article depicted Billy Gordon and Dwayne sitting on their horses and holding up their world championship buckles. The headline read "Three Time World Champion Cowboy Paralyzed in Accident". Another smaller photo captured Billy's horse tripping out of the chute. The horse had fallen on Billy, damaging his spine. The doctors

said he'd never walk again. Blood tests later run by rodeo officials on Billy's horse found massive amounts of an illegal tranquilizer. Not only did Billy suffer the loss of his legs, he was accused of drugging his horse and despite his condition, barred from the PCRA.

Billy swore he did not drug his horse and Jarod believed him. But then the question remaining was who did drug the horse?

\* \* \* \*

"Are you certain he's here?" Miss Parker asked Broots, her voice only hinting at the simmering anger underneath her calm façade. She had never felt so ridiculous in her life, but Sydney was right, to blend in they had to buy the right clothes. Her cowboy boots pinched her toes and her cowboy hat made her hair flat--what Broot's so charmingly called 'hat-hair'-and though she realized she looked good in these tight Wrangles, she didn't want to run out and add more pairs to her wardrobe. The shirt with the pearl buttons wasn't too ridiculous, but not her style.

"Positive," Broots replied.

Miss Parker rolled her eyes. "My good, Broots, you look like a Hee-Haw reject."

Self-consciously he ran his hand over his red checkered shirt. "I don't look right?"

"Don't worry about it, you'll fit right in." She held a hand to her brow. "Now what about wonder cowboy?"

"I found his name on the contestant roster," Broots replied absently, staring around like a wide-eyed kid.

It then occurred to Miss Parker that Sydney had never been to a rodeo, and both he and Broots stared around them like wide-eyed kids. It almost appeared that they'd forgotten what they were here for and instead of worrying where Jarod was, they poured over the event program deciding what to watch. Irritated, she reached over and snatched the program from Broot's hands.

"Hey!"

"Listen Howdy Doody, we're not here to enjoy the sites. We need to find Jarod, now!"

\* \* \* \*

The Diamondhead dance hall stretched across the far end of an immense dirt parking lot filled with pickup trucks and dusty sport utility vehicles. A large neon sign of a striking rattlesnake lit up the night with greens and reds. Jarod parked his battered white Ford pickup truck and walked up a set of wooden steps and into the bar.

Couples filled a huge dance floor to his left. To the right, a long bar and dozens of small tables stretched off into the smoky darkness. A few faces he recognized from the rodeo contestants and some nodded his way, recognizing him in turn. He spied Dwayne at the bar, a mug

of beer in his hand while he spoke with the brunette woman who had been with Jessie earlier. He started over to join Dwayne when a hand on his arm stopped him.

"Hey, Jarod," said a familiar voice. Jessie looked up at him with a friendly smile and Jarod wondered if he looked as dazzled as he felt. He couldn't help but return her smile. "I've been looking for you," she continued. "We can get a beer later, let's dance." She crooked a hand under his forearm and turned to lead him to the dance floor. Jarod didn't budge, his gaze locked on the floor full of dancers and Jessie came up short. She looked back at him.

"Dancing isn't my strong suit," he explained.

Jessie cocked her head up at him. "Don't tell me you don't know how to two-step?"

"Okay, I won't," Jarod answered.

"C'mere, cowboy, I'll teach you how." She gave his arm a little tug. "I don't bite. At least not too hard. I promise." And she crossed a finger over her chest.

Jarod followed her to the dance floor. He'd never danced a step in his life. Perhaps sensing his misgivings, Jessie kept them to the fringe of the mass of dancers so he could easily watch her steps without being jostled. She stepped close to him and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Now, place your hand on my waist here. That's right. My hand stays on your shoulder and you hold my other hand like so." She glanced up at the band as they started another tune. "Okay, here's the Boot Scootin' Boogie. Now watch my feet and also take a look at the other couples. Feel the beat. Heel, toe, dosey-doe. Get down, turn around, go to town, Boot Scootin' Boogie. See, it's easy." She beamed up at him as he effortlessly followed. He stumbled then, her close proximity scrambling his equilibrium.

"That's okay," she said, "just relax a bit, you're stiff as a board."

Jessie picked up the pace and Jarod followed, finding that if he didn't stare at her, his feet did a better job of obeying his mind. Jarod glanced at one of the other couples and copied their moves, spinning Jessie around several times without breaking his steps.

"You're a quick study, greenhorn," she laughed up at him, then her smile faltered and she stumbled.

"Something wrong?"

"There's Buck and Charlie." She nodded towards the bar.

"They seem pleasant."

"It's not them, it's Buck's wife, Lucy. She ran some good times today and we're tied right now, tomorrow will be the showdown day," Jessie explained. "Oreo is running heading to head with her and her ten grand horse. She isn't happy, though behind that smiling facade she'd



really like to kick my teeth in. I saw rodeo official testing her horse this morning, but the tests were negative. Knowing her, I'm surprised."

"What do you mean, tests?"

"Drugs. She's been suspended once for giving her last horse illegal performance enhancing drugs. She's on probation right now. One more screw up and she's out." Jessie took another look in the direction of Buck and Charlie.

Jarod swung Jessie around and stared at the red-haired woman standing next to Charles, the younger Garrett brother. His eyes narrowed.

"Hey," Jessie whispered and blew softly on his cheek. He stumbled but quickly recovered. "If you squeeze my hand any harder, you're going to squeeze it off."

He loosened his grip as the music ended.

"If looks could kill," she said and cocked her head at him. "Oh listen, they're playing the Cotton-Eyed Joe." He must have looked confused because she shook her head. "Whoa cowboy, where you been? Mars? You'll like this one. It's a line dance." She grabbed his hand, but he resisted. Charles and Lucy were leaving the bar and he wanted to see what they were up to.

"I have a few errands to run," he said, his eyes never leaving the back door where the two had exited.

Lucy shrugged. "Story of my life. Save a dance for me later, Jarod." She sauntered, off, joining Dwayne and his brunette friend at the bar.

At the back exit, Jarod opened the door and stepped out. He didn't see either Lucy or Charles. Keeping close to the building and staying in the shadows, Jarod walked around to the side of the dancehall. He looked around the corner of the building and found Lucy and Charles near a faded green truck, they were arguing but keeping their voices low. Jarod crouch-ran behind a truck, then weaving around parked vehicles he made his way to a truck near them. The grit crusted window of the driver's side concealed him while allowing him to hear and see them.

"I'm not helping you this time," Charles said. "Someone got hurt last time. It isn't fair."

"Who cares about fair," Lucy replied. She stepped closed to him and he didn't move away. "All is fair in love and war, right?"

"Buck is my brother," he whispered, brushing a hand across his face and sidling away from her.

"But you need me anyway," Lucy replied, ran her hands across his shoulders and around his neck. He pulled away and her face twisted in rage. "You and your brother would be nothing without me! You'd be nothing but stupid hicks still branding cattle at some two-bit ranch," she ground out. "Tomorrow evening after the finals you'll be thanking me." She whirled around and stalked away.

Jarod's narrow-eyed stare followed her across the parking lot where she disappeared back into the dancehall.

\* \* \* \*

Jarod pulled his truck into the hospital parking lot. He had changed his cowboy garb for more casual wear that wouldn't stand out. He entered the hospital from a side door as two nurses walked out, barely looking at the nametag pinned on his shirt; he kept a few of them with him and was amazed at how often they came in hand.

The hospital was quiet, and only a few staff members were about this late at night. He quickly located an unoccupied doctors' lounge. Borrowing a white coat and found a stethoscope in an empty exam room further down the hall, not that he needed the stethoscope, but the more official he looked, the least likely it would be that someone would challenge him.

Jarod traversed the halls and soon found pediatrics. It only took him another few minutes to procure the items he needed. He dropped the hypodermic needle and a full drug vial into his pocket and headed out to door.

\* \* \* \*

Miss Parker took off her hat and fanned her face. The mercury topped out at 85 degrees today and she looked longingly for some shade. Later, she promised herself, they still hadn't found Jarod, not a surprise considering this crowd. Hundreds of contestants competed in the five-day rodeo, one of the largest in the United States. Broots and Sydney were in the stands watching, and no amount of threatening could pull them away. Fine, she thought, let them watch and when she brought Jarod in the credit would be all hers.

Turning, she scanned the crowd and noticed a handsome, dark haired cowboy on a golden-colored horse. He looked damn good in those tight, faded Levis and a white shirt, she thought to herself. Now there's a cowboy that could make a few hearts flutter. Though cowboys were not her usual style or choice in men, she'd make an exception in his case. She tilted her head and regarded him. Perhaps she should ask him to have a beer with her later. Miss Parker wasn't a beer drinker either, but she probably wouldn't even notice the taste with him sitting on a barstool next to her.

The cowboy looked in her direction and Miss Parker found herself staring at Jarod.

\* \* \* \*

"Damn Rogers, I don't know what it is about you and women, but there's this dynamite brunette that's been staring at you like a hungry cowboy stares at a big steak," Dwayne lamented. "I can't even remember the last time a woman looked at me like that."

"Really?" Jarod looked up into the eyes of Miss Parker. She started towards him. He reined Trigger around as an icy chill climbed up his back despite the heat. He couldn't leave now, he had to help Billy and he couldn't run out on Dwayne. "This is one gal you don't want to wrestle with," he said to Dwayne and urged Trigger to a trot, weaving

through milling hoards of contestants.

Far across the rodeo ground, he finally reined the horse to a halt, then stood in the stirrups and looked out over the crowd. He had lost her. Now all he had to do was avoid her, and whoever else she had with her, until tonight.

\* \* \* \*

"Welcome all to the Salinas Rodeo final evening, and the event finals!" the announcer said over the loud speaker system to a cheering crowd.

Jarod scanned the crowd in the bleachers. He wanted to stay and watch the rodeo before he and Dwayne competed in the team-roping event, but he had work to do and he didn't want to take the chance of Miss Parker finding him. He turned and made his way through the crowd to the barn where he and Dwayne stabled their horses. He checked both animals and both were okay. He then extracted the items he'd taken from the hospital out of his tack trunk, then positioned himself in an empty stall. He loosely closed the door without latching it.

Twenty minutes had past before he heard someone enter the barn. A soft female voice begin cooing to Trigger and he heard a stall door latch open. Jarod counted on her target being either his horse or Dwayne's. He looked out and watched Lucy Garrett enter Trigger's stall. He quietly pushed open the stall door with a forefinger and ducking down, ran across the barn isle and peered into the stall.

Lucy Garrett had offered Trigger a carrot. The horse happily munched the treat down. In the other hand she held a hypodermic needle.

"Well, well, I wasn't expecting visitors," Jarod said as he moved in front of the in front of the stall door. "I don't think we've met properly."

"Jarod!" the woman said as she spun around. She held one hand behind her back. "I was just looking at your horse. I like palominos."

"You do? Did you like Billy's horse, too?"

"What?" she said, backing away as he entered the stall and looking for another escape route.

"Are you going to drug my horse just like you drugged Billy's horse?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, panic rising in her voice.

"I think you do." He approached her.

"Get away from me or I'll scream."

"And say what?" Jarod smiled and pointed to hand she held behind her back. "Especially with that in your hand."

Jarod took two quick steps toward her and pressed an ether soaked rag over her mouth and she slumped in his arms. He lowered her to the straw, rolled her to her stomach and pulled up her shirt to expose the small of her back. Out of a breast pocket he extracted a hypodermic needle and vial wrapped in a piece of cloth. After filling the hypodermic needle, he carefully inserted it into her spine.

\* \* \* \*

Jarod sat in the corner of the stall as Lucy regained consciousness. He had saddled Trigger, his event would be up soon, but he needed to chat with Lucy first. She moaned and her eyes fluttered as she held a hand to her head and tried to roll over. Her eyes popped open and she thrashed her arms against the straw.

"I can't...I can't feel my legs! I can't move! My legs!" Lucy screamed, hands pawing at her useless, numb legs. She stared around and found Jarod chewing on a piece of hay and sitting in the corner.

"What have you done to me?" Tears sparkled in her eyes but Jarod felt nothing. He couldn't, not after what she'd done to Billy.

"Ever heard 'A taste of your own medicine'?"

"You're crazy!"

"That's debatable." He smiled faintly and shrugged, then plucked the hay from his mouth and tossed it to the side. "Look at it this way, now you know how Billy feels," Jarod ground out, his mood instantly changing from joking to furious anger. He stood and approached her, his hands clenched at his side. "Billy is going to sit in that wheel chair for the rest of his life because of your greed. How does it feel, Lucy? How does it feel to be unable to use your legs, unable to do all the things you used to do?"

"No!" she screamed. She held her arms out to Jarod. "I never meant for Billy to get hurt, I only wanted his horse to trip. Please help me." She pulled herself across the straw toward him. He stepped away, his arms crossed as he looked down at her.

"You should have thought about all this before you drugged his horse." Without another word he turned and strode out of the stall, mounting up on Trigger and never looking back as Lucy's panicked wails followed him out of the barn. Outside, Jarod took the tape recorder out of his pocket and clicked it off. Riding toward the arena, he found Buck and Charles with a string of other cowboys perched on the arena fencing near the chutes.

"Hey Buck," he greeted, and tossed him the small recorder.

Buck caught it. "What's this, Greenhorn."

"I think you should listen to it and have a good talk with your wife and your brother."

"Lucy?" Buck asked, perplexed.

"She's hanging out in Trigger's stall. Believe me, she isn't going

anywhere, but unlike Billy, she should be okay in oh, say," he glanced at his watch, "a few hours. The partial epidural will have worn off by then."

Jarod trotted Trigger away to join Dwayne further down as Buck and Charles glanced at one another then hopped off the fence and ran toward the barn.

"Peers to me like Buck and Charles had their tails on fire. What'd you tell them?" Dwayne commented as Jarod joined him.

Jarod leaned on the saddle horn and chuckled low. "Oh, nothing. Just had an interesting chat with Lucy Garrett."

\* \* \* \*

"That's him!" Broots shouted and jumped to his feet, spilling popcorn from a bag cradled in one arm and waving the hotdog he held in the other hand.

Two horses burst from the chute and galloped at full speed on the heels of a steer. The riders were already swinging their ropes over their head. While the heading cowboy expertly roped the horns around the steer, the heeling cowboy, riding a golden colored horse, swung his lasso and somehow managed to rope the steers two back legs. The timing was impeccable and the crowd roared.

"Hold your breath folks, here comes the official time of that ride." The announcer shouted. "And we have a new arena record!"

Broots and Sydney cheered. Miss Parker stood up and elbowed Broots. He doubled over, wrapping his arms across his stomach but somehow managing not to drop his food.

"If you're finished with this hero worship, we have work to do."

Broots sobered, but Sydney's merriment wasn't dimmed. "Parker, you need to learn how to enjoy yourself."

"I'll enjoy myself when Jarod is back at the Centre."

\* \* \* \*

Jarod sat on Trigger amongst a congratulatory crowd. He and Dwayne held up their championship belt buckles for the official rodeo photographer. A movement caught the corner of his eye and he turned. Miss Parker? He almost reined Trigger around, but he didn't want to risk trampling anyone. Trying to control rising panic, he reached over and shook Dwayne's hand.

"Nice riding with you, but I gotta go."

"Where ya' goin' greenhorn?" the cowboy asked. Then Dwayne spied Miss Parker. "Ah, she's an old girlfriend with a grudge?"

"Not quite the first part, but there's definitely a grudge." Jarod turned his horse and the crowd parted, letting him through.

"There he is," Jarod heard a familiar voice, Miss Parker's voice.

Clear of the crowd, Jarod urged Trigger into a gallop through the mostly deserted back lots and to the barn. He stables Trigger in a vacant stall next to Jessie's horse then gathered up his knapsack. It was only personal item he needed. As a second thought he collected his lasso and looped it over one shoulder then hurried out of the barn and back into the moonlight. He pressed himself in the narrow space between the opened barn door and the barn wall as Miss Parker appeared, out of breath and gripping a gun in both hands.

\* \* \* \*

Miss Parker stopped in the deserted barn area. Broots and Sydney had taken a circuitous rout in case Jarod tried to circle around them. She didn't see them anywhere.

"Damn!" she muttered, realizing she might have lost Jarod again. She lowered her gun, barrel pointed towards the ground. \_What a hell of a night\_, she thought. Out of the darkness a white flash snaked towards her, fell around her shoulders and pinned her arms to her side.

A lasso?

Miss Parker struggled. Her gun fell from her hands. Whoever held the other end of the lasso yanked hard. She stumbled to the ground and rolled desperately trying to break free. That only served to tighten the lasso. A pair of cowboy boots walked into her view then stopped.

"Why Miss Parker." Jarod's pleased voice held an odd mumbling quality. "With all the noise you were making, I thought one of the steers ad gotten out of the stock pen."

A boot kicked the gun out of her reach. Miss Parker managed to look up and noticed that he held the coiled end of the lasso, and he had a length of rawhide rope held between his teeth.

"Ah, you're wondering about this?" He pulled the rawhide out of his mouth. "This is called a piggin' string. Ropers use it to hog tie a calf. Odd that they call it hog tying." He wiggled his eyebrows.

Miss Parker suddenly realized what he planned to do with the pigging string. "You smug son of a bitch! Don't you dare! Jarod!"

"I've had a lot of practice for the last few months. Never tried it on a human though," he chuckled, enjoying himself. He bent down, rolled her over and planted his knee in the small of her back. Miss Parker struggled.

"Jarod, don't you do this!" "Don't do this or what?" Jarod chuckled as he looped the pigging string around her wrists and ankles. He rolled her to her side, pulled a red checkered handkerchief out of a back pocket and stuffed it in her mouth the moment she opened it to protest this rough treatment.

"Mmmfff!" Ms. Parker squealed.

Jarod stood over her and looked down at his handiwork. "I think I

like you better this way."

Miss Parker could only mumble furiously through the handkerchief as Jarod picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder. She tried kicking and for that effort she got a swat on the butt.

"Now Ms. Parker, behave or I'll put you in a stock pen instead of a horse stall."

In the horse barn, Jarod dumped her in a stall. At least the straw was clean, she thought. Through wild strands of hair falling about her face, she glowered up at him.

"Mmmffff!" She struggled and rolled onto her side.

"Temper temper," Jarod wagged his finger and smiled. "Someone will find you sooner or later. I'm hoping later." He tipped his hat to her. "As they say, I guess I'll be moseying now."

"ERRRR!" Miss Parker screeched and struggled at the rawhide that tied her hands and ankles together.

\* \* \* \*

"Hey Greenhorn, you look like you could use a dance," said a familiar voice as Jarod entered the Diamondhead.

"Are you offering?" Jarod returned. He held out his hand and she took it.

"I thought a cowboy was suppose to as a cowgirl to dance," Jessie said.

"Let's dance then," he said. As Jessie looked up at him, Jarod could see tears sparkling in her eyes.

"I heard what you did for Billy. In some ways I was surprised that Lucy would do that to him, but Lucy only cared about herself and what other people could do for her. Billy will be cleared of the drug charges, and though nothing will help his legs, what you've done means a lot to him."

"I've got to go," he said.

"I figured that. Spare a moment for one more dance," she whispered and with uncharacteristic somberness, took his hand and led him to the dance floor. "This is by the Mavericks. It's called Pretend."

Jessie drifted into his arms, and she laid her cheek close to his heart. Jarod looked over the crowd and tensed at the familiar trio who entered the bar.

"An old girlfriend," Jessie teased, noting the direction of his gaze.

"That's almost exactly what Dwayne asked me." His dancing steps took her to the far end of the dance floor. Over the crowd he met Ms. Parker's angry glare. Guess she was still angry about being hogtied, Jarod thought with an inward smile.

"They're after you, aren't they?" Jessie asked.

Jarod nodded. He took her hand and led her across the bar to the rear of the building. A red neon exit sign glowed through the heavy smoke. The door opened to the back of the parking lot.

"I have something for you," he said. He reached into his back pocket and drew out a piece of paper and a key. "This is the key to my saddle locker and Trigger's bill of sale. Find him a good home."

"I will, Greenhorn," Jessie said, then grabbed his hand and pulled him to her, their lips meeting in a fleeting kiss.

Jarod held her hand a moment, then pulled away and disappeared into the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

Brandishing her 9mm, Ms. Parker pushed her way through the crowded bar toward rear entrance where Jarod had disappeared. She gestured to Sydney to go out the front and around to the back. He nodded and disappeared back the way they had come.

The blonde, who had been dancing with Jarod, blocked the rear exit. Miss Parker found herself sized up in one long glance.

"Out of my way, blondie," Miss Parker said and tried to push past the woman.

The woman didn't comply, but instead stepped forward with a quick right hook. Before Miss Parker could dodge, the small but bony fist connected with her right eye. Miss Parker felt her knees wobble, then her legs gave out from underneath her and she fell to the floor.

"That's for Jarod," the woman said, standing over Miss Parker as she rubbed her knuckles then stalked away.

\* \* \* \*

Miss Parker sat at her desk. She could barely see through her left eye, and even the most copious amounts of makeup couldn't cover the purple swollen skin. She looked up at the brief knock that heralded Lyle.

"Nice shiner, Parker."

"I'm certain I could arrange to give you one, if you like it. So how was Timbuktu?" she asked and couldn't suppress a grin.

"Unpleasant, but I'm certain that is what you had in mind." He tossed a large, padded envelope on her desk. "This just came in for you. Isn't the handwriting Jarod's?"

Miss Parker leaned forward and laced her hands over the envelope.

"Weren't you just leaving?" she said, mock pleasant.



"If it's from Jarod, I should know," Lyle said.

"If it's something you should know about, then I'll tell you." She lifted one eyebrow at him as he lingered. "Otherwise, don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out."

Lyle held up his hands, palms out. "Okay, I'm leaving."

Miss Parker waited for the door to close behind Lyle before she held up the envelope and inspected it, noting the heavy weight. She opened it, reached in and smiled as she pulled out a photo of Jarod mounted on a horse next to another mounted cowboy. They held up championship buckles for the photographer. Second, she extracted a tissue wrapped oval object and peeled back the tissue. The object was a large, beautifully crafted trophy belt buckle. In brass were two riders on horses roping a steer. There was a brass, arched nameplate over it that said "Champion Team Roping", below that on a rocker plate, read "Salinas Rodeo". The buckle itself was silver with brass braiding around the oval edge.

Despite herself, Miss Parker smiled wistfully and held the buckle cupped in her hands.

"Your free days are numbered, outlaw."

End  
file.